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ABSTRACT

This publication advances an agenda on children's issues for the New York State Legislature in the 1993 budget and legislative session. An opening section reviews the status of the state's children with respect to poverty. The following section argues for a series of remedies including raising the minimum wage, offering a state earned income tax credit, increasing public assistance grants, and expanding child assistance programs. A section on children's health suggests universal health care for children, and increased participation and funding for program that address hunger. In the area of education the document advocates creation of an equitable school aid formula and redesign of special education services. A final section proposes support for vulnerable children and families through commitment to a family preservation philosophy in the development and delivery of child welfare, juvenile justice, health, mental health, family support, and community development services. This section outlines a proposed 5-year plan for state agency integration for more effective service to families. (JB)

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THE 1993

NEW YORK STATE CHILDREN'S

AGENDA

Statewide Youth Advocacy, Inc.

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Statewide Youth Advocacy, Inc.
Elie Ward, Executive Director

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contact us at 40 Sheridan Avenue, Albany, New York 12210
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ERRATA

Please make the following changes to your copy of *The 1993 New York State Children's Agenda*.

Page 1, first paragraph, line two:

...data clearly shows that our state has almost **500,000** fewer children than....

Page 4, subsection 1 under "Universal Health Care for Kids," line two:

... Medicaid law section **1902(r)2 of Title XIX** which allows states....

Page 5, paragraph 1, end of line 2:

...In 1991 **in New York City** AIDS was the....

Page 9, boxed "New York State has:", sub-item 6:

...AIDS as the leading cause of death for **New York City** children ages 1-4.

Page 10, sub-section "Year Four," paragraph 2, line 5:

remove last sentence "Waivers could be obtained as demonstration support."

Page 12, boxed "We can:", sub-item 8:

...**strengthen families and communities**... becomes a separate sub-item.

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INTRODUCTION

As we face the beginning of the 1993 budget and legislative session, we again insist that New York State take responsibility to improve the well-being of its youngest citizens.

The children of New York State are losing ground. As the recession continues, as the partisan political battles rage, as the public rhetoric focuses on blaming society's victims for their problems, as special interests strengthen their power bases in the halls of the Legislature, poor children, poor families and poor communities, urban, suburban and rural are losing ground. Children's issues are competing with well-financed special interests. We need your anger, your outrage, your voice for the children of New York to win even the smallest victories.

This year, the beginning of the sixth year of The Decade of the Child, we ask you to join us in supporting our 1993 New York State Children's Agenda. Without you we cannot win. With your help we can work to level the playing field. ***The time has come to take a stand. We cannot tolerate our children losing more ground each year.***

THE STATUS OF NEW YORK STATE'S CHILDREN

It is possible to consider accusing New York State of child neglect on a grand scale. Census data clearly shows that our state has almost five million fewer children than it did in 1980, and yet we have more children living in abject poverty, more children who start and end each day hungry, more children in our foster care system, more children in the custody of the Division for Youth, more children who are ill from preventable diseases, more children having children, more children who are homeless, more children who suffer abuse, more children who do not receive medical care, and more children experiencing school failure and dropping out of school altogether.

The status of New York State's children is declining. We are doing less for fewer children. All the major indicators of childhood distress have increased, as the total number of children has decreased. In 1980 New York State had 5,325,435 children (0-19), in 1989 the 1990 census counted 4,856,209 children in the same age group.

In 1980 children represented 30% of the State's population; in 1990 their numbers had dropped to 27%.

Here are some of the saddest moments in New York State:

- **Every 8 minutes an infant is born into poverty.**
- **Every 3 hours an infant dies.**
- **Every 24 minutes an infant is born too small to be healthy.**
- **Every 20 minutes an infant is born to a teenage mother.**
- **Every 24 hours another child is murdered.**

These are the minutes, the hours, the days that are destroying our children.

Children and Poverty

New York's children are truly in jeopardy. And although child poverty has been typically presented as a New York City problem, where 30.9% of all children under the age of six are poor, children throughout New York State in our smaller cities, our suburban communities and our rural hamlets are poor and becoming poorer.

Recent data indicates that based on 1990 census figures, **the city of Buffalo has a 42.7% poverty rate for its smallest children,** those under the age of six, and a 38.8% poverty rate for all children. Other New York State medium-sized cities which also saw large increases in children's poverty included:

Rochester: 40.5% for children under six and 38.5% for all children;

Syracuse: 39.5% for children under six and 33.2% for all children;

Yonkers: 23.4% for children under six and 20.7% for all children.

As troubling as these numbers are, they are based on data collected during 1989 for the 1990 census. During the last three years, New York State has suffered a crippling recession. The worsening economic climate has thrown hundreds of thousands more children and families into poverty.

Recently released figures indicate that nationally the number of poor people increased by 4.2 million between 1990 and 1992. The proportion of people living in poverty climbed steadily from 12.8% in 1989 to 13.5% in 1990 to 14.2 % in 1991. **Children's poverty rates rose nationally to 21.8% up from 20.6% in 1990 and 19.6% in 1989.**

For the children of New York State, increases in poverty over the last two years were dramatic; statewide more than one in four children in New York is now living in poverty. Trends indicate that, with the continuing recession, and no adjustment in wages or income support programs, we will soon be facing a statewide poverty rate for children closer to 33.3%.

Translating this number into something that everyone can understand would mean that in every classroom in New York State with an average of 24 students, eight of those children would be living in poverty. Eight of those children would not have enough food, would not have stable shelter, would not have access to quality health care, would be at greater risk of school failure, and would be at significant risk of domestic violence and child abuse and neglect.

New York's State's fiscal problems, county financial shortfalls and New York City's fiscal problems have created a decision-making gridlock which has precluded our State and local leaders from moving forward with broad-based solutions to the increasing poverty and attendant family crises which are plaguing the family of New York. The fact the New York State has lost more than $18.6 billion in federal assistance during the last 10 years has contributed to the erosion of State resources to meet escalating family needs.

But there are decisions that can and should be made by State and local leadership to improve the status of New York's children and their families. **We cannot allow New York to do nothing while we watch a generation of children be sacrificed to other less important, but more powerful, interests.** With the new administration in Washington, New York State should take the lead in showing the nation how to invest in children for the future security of our families, our communities, our workforce, and our nation.

We offer our proposals for New York State's children against a backdrop of ongoing State budget deficits, uncertainty about the direction of the federal government, and insecurity about the economic prospects of New York and the entire Northeast.

Children cannot wait. They cannot wait for things to get politically and financially better. The developmental, physical and psychological damage children suffer when they are hungry or homeless or abused or neglected will not wait. The dangers to sexually active adolescents who do not have access to family planning information, and clear information about AIDS and hepatitis will not wait. Unimmunized babies cannot wait. Children with AIDS cannot wait.

Children grow and develop their perceptions of themselves and the world around them every day. Children cannot wait for adults to decide the time is right to save their lives. We must act now if we are to save a generation of low-income children who are teetering on the brink of disaster.

INCOME SECURITY

Raise Minimum Wage

To combat the erosion of wages, especially among low-income wage earners, we propose an increase in the current minimum wage to $6.00 per hour over the next two years. Future increases should be indexed to inflation. This adjustment would help support families who continue to struggle in poverty despite the fact that they are supported by a full-time wage earner. It is estimated that well over one million New York families, more than half of the families living in poverty in New York State, are headed by full-time wage earners. Their wages are simply too low.

Establish State Refundable Earned Income Tax Credit

To help low-income working families keep more of their income, we propose a State Earned Income Tax credit, which piggybacks on the Federal E.I.T.C. A State E.I.T.C. would put dollars directly into the pockets of low-income working families. It would be one of the simplest and most direct methods of helping low-income families fight hunger, homelessness, and desperation.

Increase Public Assistance Grant

There is no more effective and direct way to fight childhood poverty in New York than to raise the public assistance grant. The value of the grant for a family of three is only 64% of the current poverty level. That equates to an AFDC family of three living 36% below the federal poverty level. Forty thousand children have been added to the public assistance roles during the last year. Forty thousand more New York State children are now living 36% below the Federal poverty level.

As of August, 1992, 753,000 children were surviving on AFDC. The total AFDC caseload increased 5.5% during the year. The unemployed parent portion of the program, which provides support for families whose wage earner has exhausted his/her unemployment benefits, increased 10.4%, and family cases within the Home Relief population increased 11.4%. The economic security of New York State's families is severely threatened. To do nothing is to ignore the long-term, intractable and expensive problems that poverty creates for children. It is imperative that the AFDC grant be increased so that hundreds of thousands of New York's children can begin to live stable, secure lives with the support and care that they need to develop into productive, independent and contributing members of the greater society.

Expand Child Assistance Program Statewide

The Child Assistance Program has been piloted for several years, and has been found to be successful in helping women and their children climb out of the abject poverty which often plagues female headed households, especially those on public assistance. Having proven its effectiveness, the program should be expanded Statewide immediately. This was one of the initiatives of the Decade of Child. It has been proven to work, it should become State policy.

CHILDREN'S HEALTH

Improvements in the health status of low income and poor children must be a priority.

Universal Health Care for Kids

We propose that New York State design and implement a universal health care program covering all children. The program we are proposing has three major components:

1. New York State should take the full expansion opportunity available in federal Medicaid law, section 19 (r) (2), which allows states to provide Medicaid coverage for children up to age 18 in families with incomes up to 300% of poverty.

2. Expand and uncap the Child Health Plus (CHIP) program. Expansion would include all children through age 18, and would include hospitalization, dental, vision and mental health services. The income eligibility levels of the program would be changed to reflect the upper percentages of poverty the State accepted in the Medicaid expansion.

3. Passage of CHIRP legislation. This legislation, already passed in seven other states including California, requires that all health insurance sold in New York State cover the primary and preventive health care needs of children, as defined by the Academy of Pediatrics.

Using these three components, along with the creation of a single application form for CHIP, WIC and Medicaid, would provide seamless, universal health care for all children.

As the State moves to design this system, it should work to bring the positive and very popular aspects of the Child Health Plus program into the Medicaid application and eligibility process for children, including out-stationing of eligibility workers, increased use of managed care providers, and local HMO's, and the natural, more respectful aspects of private insurance enrollment.

Reform of our health care system is inevitable. **We encourage our State leadership to lead New York State in health care reform by creating a program for children first.** We have the pieces in place; expanding existing components, and passing CHIRP will place New York in the forefront of children's health coverage.

In addition we propose:

An Expansion of School-Based Health Services to meet the needs of children and families who do not have a regular health care provider. Currently 110,000 pre-school and school age children have their health care needs met at school-based clinics. Passage of S. 5345/ A. 8753A would provide support for the needed expansions in all interested schools. The numbers of children served could be doubled at little cost to the State.

Increased outreach and ethnically and racially sensitive community-based health clinic programs to improve New York's unacceptable childhood immunization rate. Today, children across New York are becoming seriously ill from preventable diseases such as rubella,

whooping cough, and hepatitis. New York must improve its dismal record and accept responsibility for early immunization for all children. For years, the medical profession and advocates have demonstrated that immunization is cost-effective and a vital part of children's health care. And yet, New York continues to provide inadequate support for universal immunization.

New York must address the raging tuberculosis and AIDS epidemics, especially in the tragic ways these diseases directly impact on the lives of children and families. In 1991 AIDS was the leading cause of death for children between one and four years old. AIDS is also the destroying families as it kills young adults, many of whom are parents of young children.

NUTRITION

With the increase in poverty, more and more children are waking up hungry and going to bed without enough food. Recent survey projects by the national Food Research Action Center in various New York State communities have indicated that large numbers of poor children in our cities, our suburbs and rural communities are not getting enough to eat. Children who do not have adequate nutrition are at higher risk of illness, and of school failure. **New York must ensure that its children have enough to eat!**

We propose that New York continue to provide additional SNAP funding to supplement the Federal WIC program. But the current economic crisis gripping hundreds of thousands of New York families requires a greater contribution of State funds. Today less than 50% of eligible WIC families receive vital WIC food support. **New York must find the dollars to bring WIC participation up to 50% this year.**

The efficacy of the WIC program has never been disputed. Yet, every year, we must struggle to find the will and the additional dollars to bring more pregnant women, babies and small children the nutritional protection that WIC/SNAP can provide.

Increase Participation in School Breakfast and School Lunch Programs. School feeding programs can be an effective tool in combating hunger among school age children. New York's school-based feeding programs, however, have not been as successful as they could be. School lunch programs, although available in every school, are underutilized due to stigmatization. Less than 60% of eligible children participate. School breakfast programs, which allow youngsters the opportunity to get a healthful breakfast before the beginning of the school day, are not available in every school. And even in schools where the breakfast is available it is often offered only to low-income children. These children, especially older students, do not want to publicize their family's problems, and therefore find it hard to identify themselves by participating.

We propose increasing participation in school breakfast and school lunch programs through increased outreach, community education and training for school personnel to help students overcome barriers to participation. Additionally, the school breakfast program should be adopted by all school districts with more than 40% of students who would qualify for the program. Both the school breakfast and lunch programs are supported by federal dollars. The programs can be expanded with little or in some cases no cost to the State or the local school district.

CHILD CARE

Developmental pre-school should be available to every low-income child in New York State. Integration of Head Start, Pre-K, not-for-profit developmental day care and parents as first teacher programs should be encouraged Statewide. There are many models to choose from, but the goal of universal developmental pre-school is one that could be attained by careful allocation of resources, parent education, and leadership from the State. Proposals have been on the table for several years. It is time for New York to make a serious commitment to develop, monitor and support universal developmental pre-school for all children.

EDUCATION

The New York State education system is in crisis. In the cities, suburban areas and rural communities local school boards are cutting services, limiting children's opportunities, and reducing supports for both gifted and disadvantaged students. The leveling process is weakening our educational infrastructure throughout the State.

SYA supports the concept of The Good Common School: Making the Vision Work for All Students which defines an educational bill of rights for all students. The Good Common School concept asserts that all children are entitled to:

- ✔ have parents, advocates and concerned educators involved in all decisions affecting their education;
- ✔ learn in an integrated, heterogeneous setting responsive to different learning styles and abilities;
- ✔ comprehensive, culturally supportive and developmentally appropriate curriculum and teaching strategies;
- ✔ access to a common body of knowledge and the opportunity to acquire higher-order skills;
- ✔ a broadly-based assessment of their academic progress and grading structures that enhance individual strengths and potential;
- ✔ a broad range of support services that address individual needs;
- ✔ attend schools that are safe, attractive and free from prejudice;
- ✔ instruction by teachers who hold high expectations for all students and who are fully prepared to meet the challenges of diverse classrooms; and
- ✔ an equal educational opportunity supported by the provision of greater resources to school serving students most vulnerable to school failure.

We proposed that the educational system in New York State seriously ascribe to the principles of the The Good Common School as it deliberates how best to pull the current failing system up toward an equitable educational experience for all children.

Two primary issues that must be addressed in tandem with education reform efforts in New York are:

The Creation of An Equitable School Aid Formula

The current, overly complicated school aid formula does not address the inherent inequities of rich and poor districts. Children in New York State do not have access to equal educational opportunity. The most disadvantaged students attend the poorest schools, while the most affluent students have access to true educational laboratories.

All children in New York have a right to an equal education. The school aid formula must be revised based on student needs, district needs, and appropriate proportional sharing of resources. Anything less continues the shameless perpetuation of educational segregation by socio-economic status.

Redesign of Special Education Services Emphasizing Inclusion

New York State's current special education services are among the most segregated in the nation. Only Texas and Georgia had a higher percentage of special education students in segregated settings. New York must design and implement processes which encourage local districts to work toward the inclusion of disabled students in regular classrooms with the supports necessary for them to grow and learn.

The State Education Department must also insist on legislative changes to the current aid formula for special needs students. Under the existing formula, school districts receive more money for segregating special needs students in special classes or separate buildings than for supplying the special services needed to include these students in regular classrooms.

Attention must also be paid to the over representation of minorities in special education segregated classes. **African-American students who represent only 19% of the general student population, comprise 34.1% of the special education population. Latino students are only 15.1% of the general student population but nearly 23% of the segregated special education population.** These statistics indicate that many students are being removed from regular classes and receiving what can only be described as a segregated, and in most cases, an inferior education based on racially imposed norms.

Most recent studies indicate that disabled students make greater educational and social gains in integrated classroom settings, and yet New York continues to short change its special needs students by keeping them segregated in special classes and often even in separate buildings.

New York State must bring its entire educational establishment, parents, teachers, administrators, students, advocates and teacher training institutions together to address the obviously unacceptable number of disabled students receiving separate and unequal educational opportunities.

Other initiatives that should be supported to improve and strengthen New York State school systems include:

- ✔ **Parent Involvement**
- ✔ **Site-Based Management**
- ✔ **Increased Teacher Involvement**
- ✔ **Racially and Culturally Sensitive Curriculum Development**
- ✔ **Sensitivity and Acceptance of Different Learning Styles**
- ✔ **Schools as Community Resources**
- ✔ **Support for Developmental Pre-School Experiences**

In order to make the necessary positive changes in the existing statewide educational infrastructure and improve student outcomes, the State Education Department, the Regents, the Executive and the Legislature must become partners to design, implement and equitably support the recommended changes in program and financing for the New York State School System.

SUPPORT FOR VULNERABLE CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

New York State must commit to a family preservation philosophy in the development and delivery of its child welfare, juvenile justice, health, mental health, family support and community development services. Keeping families together, providing cross systems supports to families in crisis, allowing families to access the services they need in community-based, ethnically and racially sensitive environments must become the guiding principle of all family and children's services.

The current fragmented, punitive, crisis-driven and very expensive system of services invites and often encourages family breakups. Our system of services forces families to meet harsh and punishing requirements to get help. It is easier in New York to move children into foster care than to provide family preservation services. For a parent to receive residential drug treatment she/he most often has to give up his/her children. It is almost impossible for parents and for children in most parts of the State to receive home-based family supportive mental health services. The availability of respite services in mental health, in child welfare, and in substance abuse systems is spotty and inadequate.

New York State runs several hierarchical, parallel systems that do not in any way reflect the needs of real families in real crises.

The clear and compelling results of our inadequate, rigid systems are easy to document.

New York State has:

- 63,000 children in its foster care system.
- 15,000 homeless children across the State.
- A ten-fold increase in reports of child abuse and neglect.
- School failure and school drop-out rates which continue to escalate.
- Teenage pregnancies at their highest level in a decade, 90.2 pregnancies per 1,000 for 15-19-year-olds -- more than 9% of live births Statewide were to girls ages 10-19.
- AIDS as the leading cause of death for children ages 1-4.
- Gun violence as the major cause of death for young black males.
- And perhaps most distressing, an overwhelming and ever-expanding prison population.

New York is spending billions of federal, state and local dollars on programs, and services for vulnerable families. The question must be asked are we spending our money wisely? Are we spending our dollars and our energies to help families or punish them? Are we meeting families' needs or the bureaucracies' needs? **The numbers are compelling. If the system makes it easier to do damage than to do good, it is damage that we will do.**

We propose creating an integrated, family-supportive human service system which is flexible, community-based, supportive, and designed to meet families' needs.

We Propose

A five-year commitment from the Executive and the Legislature to integrate children and family programs and funding in the areas of child welfare, mental health, health, juvenile justice, substance abuse services, and at-risk programs in the education department. History has shown that only high level Executive and Legislative leadership can force any systemic change in New York State.

Year One The Governor must make a public statement, that children and family services across all Executive agencies will be integrated over the next five years.

The Department of Social Services, Office of Mental Health and the Division for Youth identify core services that their mandates and funding streams require for at-risk children and families.

Year Two The Department of Health and the State Education Department would do the same.

Year Three Plans would be developed to integrate services across departments.

Year Four State agencies would produce a State plan including guidelines and new regulations to support the integration plan. The cooperating agencies would develop a core service plan integrating services across agencies and funding streams as a guide to counties.

The participating agencies will determine which funding streams are State regulated and which are federally regulated. They will remove State barriers to integrated services on a demonstration basis. No change in statute would be required. Waivers for integrating federal categorical programs, if necessary, would be requested on an as needed basis. Waivers could be obtained as demonstration support.

Year Five County implementation would begin.

The Action Plan for Implementation would be supported by:

- ✔ Creation of a high level State cross-systems work group to focus specifically on obtaining federal waivers to make decategorization possible for a State-wide model.
- ✔ Integration and cross-training of all participating departmental regional staff so that they are capable of supporting local integrative action planning.
- ✔ Invitation to five counties to produce a single comprehensive service plan for child welfare, mental health, children and youth, and juvenile justice services.
- ✔ Provision of technical support and training for counties, cities, and localities to develop and implement cross system programs.
- ✔ Passage of integrative services legislation modeled on Wisconsin's Children Come First and Iowa's Integrative Services Agenda.

To begin this process the participating agencies would identify programs and their funding streams which were designed to reduce poverty, enhance child well-being and strengthen families. As programs are identified within and between systems, appropriate structures would be designed and implemented to blend program requirements and funding supports. An example might be combining Runaway and Homeless Youth programs and funding within the Division for Youth with Independent Living Programs within the Department of Social Services to create a blended and stronger program for adolescents who are adrift on the fringes of many of our communities.

The most conservative outcome would be a formal, detailed outline of the core program requirements and funding regulations to be shared between all agencies serving children and families. The most radical, and the preferred outcome, should be a true integration of programs and funding within the family preservation/family support philosophical construct.

The time for tinkering around the edges of moribund systems is past. The children and families of New York need a family-focused, community-based service structure which can meet their needs, and provide efficient, cost-effective services.

Dollars in all child and family serving systems must be redirected to investments in community-based, ethnically sensitive, preventive, remedial and respite services. The so-called "continuum of care" must be weighted differently. The scales should be tipped toward the development of community-based, preventive and supportive services for child welfare, juvenile justice, and mental health. The educational and health infrastructure should look to community based, family empowerment models. **If it takes a whole community to raise a child, then New York State's communities must be given the resources to help all families raise their children.**

Families must be able to find the help and support they need to help them solve their problems. Family preservation philosophy should imbue all children and family services. Child welfare, juvenile justice, substance abuse, mental health, education and health services must work together to help vulnerable families and disadvantaged communities find their strengths and move beyond crisis, dependency and failure.

Without significant structural and outcome changes in its children and family services bureaucracy, New York State will continue to throw billions of dollars at problems that will not be resolved. Families and communities will continue to experience failure and will become ever more weakened and dependent on systems that cannot provide what they need. **The ongoing struggles of the State and local budget crises, offers an opportunity for radical change. We challenge the State decision-makers to take this opportunity to create a children and family support system for the twenty-first century!**

CONCLUSION

We have offered our blueprint for improving the lives of New York State's children. Our recommendations are action plans. Our goals for improving the well-being of New York's children can be accomplished. All that is lacking is the political will to make children a priority.

SYA asks that you sign on to our New York Children's Agenda - that you enlist in our army of adults for children. As we begin another budget and legislative year, there is much that can and should be accomplished. We can make the lives and millions of New York children better.

We can:

- reduce the number of children in foster care,
- increase school success,
- improve our childhood immunization rate,
- create universal health care for children,
- keep mentally ill children out of institutions,
- increase our mainstreaming of special education students,
- create and pass a more equitable school aid formula,
- offer more community-based supports to children involved with delinquency, strengthen families and communities.

Working together, we can raise our voices and demand that our State take the future of all of its children into consideration at every point in the statewide decision-making process. How we, as a society, treat our children is the clearest measure of our humanity. **We can, and indeed, we must do better. It is time for New York to focus on real, long-term investments in children and families.**